Exam-oriented English Teaching in China's High School: A Case Study
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Characteristics of China's educational context

The educational context in China has a unique set of characteristics that distinguishes it from those in other cultures. Teachers in China's Confucian tradition are regarded as an authoritative resource of knowledge. Students are imparted knowledge by their teachers and discouraged to think critically of the teachers' words.

As for turn-taking pattern, though students can put up their hands to bid for a turn, it is the teacher's choice who would be the next turn taker. When a student voices his/her opinion, he/she needs to stand up and face the teacher rather than the peer students. This class rule to some extent inhibits peer interaction. Because other classmates can't respond immediately to the speaker until the teacher grant them the time and floor to speak.

The average size of the high school class is comparatively large in China. According to a 2010 report [1] , more than 60 percent of the classes in senior high schools in China have over 50 students. Teachers need to teach in an efficient way if they want to cover the content in the mandated textbooks. Content in textbooks is very important as it is closely related with the national college entrance exam (*gaokao*), known as *'the gaokao baton'.* The exam result is an important, if not the sole criterion for the assessment of high school education.

It is worth to note that there are great differences between schools in metropolises and schools in small cities and rural areas, in terms of teachers' qualifications, teaching resources, teaching methods, teaching objectives, and students' motivation of learning English.

Data description

This article analyzes an EFL class in a high school located in the northern part of China. It is an English listening class centering around practice of listening test items. The class video comes from a DVD product by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, a collection of *'High Quality English Classes'* from high schools around the country. The students are in the

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[1] http://en.people.cn/90001/90782/90872/6945291.html

third year of high school. The class is recorded in 2008. It is still of relevance today as the teaching approach represented in this dataset still exists extensively in China, especially in communities where families have limited resources and the only way for the next generation to climb up the social ladder is to score high in the national college entrance examination and get admitted in the university.

When I watched videos in this collection, I was immediately drawn to the diversity of EFL teaching approaches in China's high schools. There are teachers who place an emphasis on making the class highly interactive and there are teachers following an unvarying IRE or IRF patterns, resulting in an orderly, yet boring class. This class under study is interesting because it invites further thinking about why this traditional teaching approach continues to prevail. At first sight, when compared with other teachers' highly-interactive and interesting classes, I immediately classified this class as a total failure and all the strategies used make no sense. But when I take into consideration teaching evaluation criteria that situated in particular contexts, I realize the reasons behind the teacher's practice. The practice of such a teaching approach is not merely out of the teacher's individual choice. Instead, the test-driven education plays a crucial role in the formation and predominance of this type of teaching.

Analysis

Teaching aims and procedure

In the beginning of the class, the teacher reads out the *teaching aims* (not goals or objectives), *difficult and important points* and *teaching procedures* written on the slides as follows:

>*3 teaching aims*
>*to improve students' listening ability by learning about some methods and practicing listening*
>*to develop students' spirit of cooperation and train them to think for themselves*
>*to pay attention to the development of students' mental health and social values.*
>**Difficult and important points**
>*Using the methods of inductive inference to improve listening ability*
>*Improving the ability of thinking and solving problems by themselves*
>**Teaching procedures**
>*Step 1: Test characteristics*
>*Step 2: Test prediction*
>*Step 3: Test skills*
>*Step 4: Skills of six listening subjects*
>*Step 5: Summary*

The first teaching aim, as we will see later, guides most of the classroom activities. The most time of the class is devoted to teaching test-taking skills and doing authentic test items from examination papers in past years.

In the statement of the second teaching aim, the verbs *develop* and *train* indicate the instructor's cognition of teaching as an act of transforming and shaping, and of students as raw material to be shaped or molded.

Both the second and the third teaching aim are far-fetched and unlikely to be achieved in a single class. The third aim, in particular, seems to be more a lip-service than a real goal. This aim statement shows the teacher's recognition of her role as a moral educator. As some researchers (Han, Yin, & Wang, 2015; Rao & Chan, 2009) pointed out, Chinese teachers perceive their responsibilities not only in promoting students' development in academic areas, but also cultivating students' growth in non-academic areas.

These aims might not be a real revelation of actual teaching goals and teaching philosophy. They are likely to be written for the purpose of aligning the class to the common teaching evaluation standards in the particular sociocultural context.

Class activities

Basically, four types of activities are observed in this class. The instructor begins the class with a lead-in, followed with a video watching activity, then asks students to listen to a song and do a cloze exercise. For the rest of time, the instructor teaches the test skills and leads the students in doing listening comprehension exercises. The fourth activity takes around 43 minutes out of the 50-minute class, and the former three activities take about 7 minutes in total. The transcript of lead-in is as follows.

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 1   T: class begins
 2   S1: stand up!
 3   Ss: good afternoon, teacher!
 4   T: sit down, please.
 5   T: How are you today, class?
 6   Ss: fine, thank you, and you?
 7   T: I'm fine too. What about the weather?
 8   Ss: =the weather is
 9   Ss: =It's
10   T:        [It's sunny
11   Ss:             [sunny
12   T: Are you happy?
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13 Ss: yes!
14 T: in this class, we will listen(.) As we all know(.) listening plays an important part in our test (.) Right? class (.)
15 Ss: Yes!
16 T: Do you want to improve our listening?
17 Ss: Yes!
18 T: I hope in this class you will improve your listening ability(.) first, let's come to (.) err (.) look at our powerpoints.

The classroom rituals of students standing up before class and greet the teacher by shouting out "good afternoon!" together show their respect to the teacher. Many a high school still keeps this classroom ritual. From line 5 on, the greetings are more like specific interaction in this particular class than a common ritual. Though there is a chance that the instructor has practiced with her students for recording, it is no wonder that the students come up with the same answer *'Fine. Thank you. And you?'* to the *'how are you'* question. Because this is a classic reply written in a widely used English textbook in China and has been taught by English teachers in China for at least 20 years. When I first studied English, I was taught this; and recently I realized my niece, a second grader in primary school, was taught by his teacher this utterance again, evidenced by his immediate, fluent reply *'Fine. Thank you. And you?'* to my *'How are you'* question in our English conversational practice. This expression is so deeply ingrained into our Chinese students' mind and is used as a chunk by Chinese students.

Questions in line 12, 14, 16 in this led-in are obvious display questions, neither seeking for authentic, thoughtful responses, nor encouraging informative production from the students.

The video watching activity seems to be completely irrelevant to the English class, as the video, which is about the preparatory progress of Beijing Olympic games, is completely in Chinese. Not a single English word appear or is pronounced in the 49 seconds video.

<Play a short video about Beijing Olympic Games>
1   T: who can tell us what the powerpoint is about? (.) together, please
2   Ss: The Olympic gamez [2]
3   T: The Olympic gamez (.) When will the Olympic gamez be helda? It comes (.)
4   Ss: [Aug
5   Ss: [Octo
6   T: in [August
7   Ss: [August
8   T: nah (.) in the Olympic gamez(.) do you want to attenda to the Olympic gamez? Eh?
9   Ss: yes!
10 T: so when you (inaudible) a guest (.) you will have chance to go to Beijing to the Olympic games (.) and you know there will be a lot of foreigners (.) yes class?
11 Ss: yes!

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[2] pronunciation problems

12 T: if you want to communicate with them(.) you must be a good speaker of English (.) so understanding what they say is most important one (.) so the listening is very important (.) now in this class we will practice listening(.) there are together four types (.) step one test features (.) step two test prediction(.) step three test skills (.) step four skills of six listening subjects (.) now before these four steps, we will listen to music and fill in the blank with right words (.) understanda?

13 Ss: yes!

14 T: Let's begin. Listen carefully.

< paly the first section of 'My love' by Westlife>

The introduction of this teaching artifact into this class may be attributed to three reasons. First, the instructor would like to display her utilization of multi-media resources in the class. Second, she wants to show her attention to national events. Third, as the teacher indicates, this event might exert an impact on the students' motivation of learning English. She tries to relate the video to the current class by pointing out English listening is an important skill enabling students to communicate with foreigner they might meet in the Olympic games. However, this explicitly expressed reason sounds like a forced analogy to me.

The questions are not authentic at all. The students only need to respond with a 'yes' or with a factual knowledge, and the instructor makes the rule clear that students are expected to answer together. In this way, a whole sentence is not expected in the students' production. And as to the time of Olympic games, it sounds like some students just follow their peers and tend to say *October*. But the instructor doesn't detect the differences in students' responses, and she just reaches at her planned analogy.

Discourse pattern

An investigation of the conversational turns in this classroom reveals the instructor's repetitive utilization of the IRE/IRF pattern through the whole class, display questions in each IRE/IRF structure, and fixed linguistic forms in elicitation and feedback.

1 < After playing the first section of 'My love' by Westlife>

2 T: let's look at the answer (.) (look at her computer, play the powerpoint of questions and answers appear one by one) volunteer please (.) (holds her hands up)

3 Ss: (hands up)

4 T: S1, please.

5 S1: alone

6 T: spell

7 S1: a-l-o-n-e

8 T: Ok (.) very good (.) sit down please (.)

9 T: next one (.) the song we (.) S2.

10 S2: sang

11 T: spell

12 S2: s-a-n-g
13 T: sang, s-a-n-g, right class?
14 Ss: yes!
15 T: OK, sit down, please (.) I am (.) together please
16 Ss: holding
17 T: holding, ok, good

In the question-and-response sequences, the teacher always relies on the following options in a fixed order: read the question and call a student, a concise one-word instruction *'spell'*, sometimes a request for peer evaluation by *'right, class?'* or *'simple?' (meaning 'it is simple, isn't it?'),* an acknowledgement *'ok'* and an explicit evaluation *'good'*, then *'sit down'* as an ending of this round of turns.

The instructor depends on the same set of strategies in each IRF/IRE turn. The excerpt below shows the same discourse pattern in the main classroom activity of practicing listening test questions from actual exam papers in past years.

1   <play audio>
2   T: Who can tell us the answer? S3, please
3   S3: xuan A ('xuan', Chinese equivalent of 'choose')
4   T: xuan A (.) right class?
5   Ss: Yes!
6   T: which one (.) which is (.) key word?
7   S3: do you want (.) can I try it on?
8   T: very good, sit down, please (.) key word is (.)
9   Ss: try it on!
10 T: another word?
11 Ss: buy
12 T: yes (.) very good (.) buy (.) let's listen to test three (.) listen carefully

13 <play audio>
14 T: Who can tell us the answer? S4
15 S4: xuan C ('xuan', Chinese equivalent of 'choose')
16 T: xuan C (.) yes class?
17 Ss: Yes!
18 T: nice (.) How can you get the answer?
19 S: good and the (indecipherable) is full
20 T: yes (.) sit down please (.) yes (.) the key words are (.) (pointing to screen where the answer and key words are shown)
21 Ss: (read together from the screen; indecipherable)

Questions and feedback put forward by the teacher are quite similar to the previous ones used in the cloze test practice. A slightly altered expression of question is used, that is *'who can tell us the answer?'* Also, the second teacher turn of giving an instruction with the word *'spell'*

turn into a further elicitation *'what is (the) key word?'* However, the teacher's utterances in this activity again are almost the same both linguistically and strategically.

Other observations

As for turn-taking, there's no autonomous, voluntary turn-taking. Instead, after asking a question and having students hands up, the teacher would name a student to take the next turn and have the student answer two questions, one is about the answer and the other is a predictable follow-up question ('*spell*' or '*key word*'). The teacher oftentimes asks the class to read or answer together. These ground rules in this classroom results in a low level of student production and peer interaction.

The analysis of the whole class dataset shows that the interaction between the teacher and the students are in a mechanic and unnatural way. Iteration is limited to question-and-answer sequences, and there is no peer interaction and cumulative talk, not to mention inter-thinking. It can be said that authentic communication and interaction are almost nonexistent.

Interestingly, the switch of code occurs from time to time. Most written words shown on the screen are Chinese, while in the teacher's instruction he translates these words into English. But whenever she asks one student or the whole class to read the words aloud, the language used by students is Chinese again.

Teaching of test-taking skills

As aforementioned, the teaching of test-taking strategies, together with test question exercise, takes the majority time of this class. Test skills are taught metalinguistically before doing the test questions. The instructor elaborates on the test-taking skills to a great detail. She summarizes three characteristics of the test questions, analyzes the tendency of the test, repeats the pronunciation rules in oral English, and highlights the words that should be paid special attention to. A table of the classification of test question types is even presented to the class.

When it comes to test question exercise, the instructor at first classifies the questions into six *'listening subjects'* (six types of topics, e.g. place and direction, people, event, etc.), and then explains skills for each type of question, coupled with students' practice and drill of authentic test questions. For example, for questions in the place and direction category, the strategies suggested by the teacher include: 1) infer the place where the conversation takes place by the speaker identity, for instance, the conversation between a teacher and a student often occurs in

the teacher's office or in the classroom; 2) be familiar with words of places like '*office'*, *'classroom'*,*' store'*, *'airport*', *'hotel'* and so on; 3) infer the direction of movement by verbs like '*go'*, *'come'*, *'live'* and prepositions '*in'*, *'at'*, *'for'*, etc.

Discussion

When I watched the English class videos in the same collection, I found some other English classes in big cities form a stark contrast with this class that is from an ordinary school in a small city. A male teacher from a middle school in Shanghai successfully maintains a high level of interaction in which students are more talkative and contributive in his class. That teacher shows a higher level of language proficiency. Contrastively, the teacher under study not only adopts an exam-oriented teaching method, but also falls short of the expected language proficiency level. Her heavily accented pronunciation and intonation, the simplistic nature of her L2 production, the fixed forms of expressions, and errors she makes all point to her lack of oral English resources. She produces the following sentence when she is pointing to a picture of a hotel.

1 T: Do you want to live in that hotel?
2 Ss: Yes!
3 T: but you know (.) money is very, very high (.)

Based on the above observations, it can be inferred that it would be a challenge for the instructor to use English in functional, communicative ways. As a natural consequence, she would not choose a highly interactive way of teaching, which is hard to handle and beyond her capabilities.

This practice of sticking to directly instructive, non-interactive teaching approaches goes opposite to the profound curriculum reform in Chinese secondary school system. The curriculum reform promotes teaching approaches like task-based language teaching, cooperative learning, inquiry-based teaching, with the goal of shifting emphasis away from exam-oriented education to education in which students' communicative competence, personal growth, qualities as a lifelong learner can be developed. (Wang & Lam, 2009; Zhu, 2007; Yan, 2014). The gap between the curriculum reform requirements and the teachers' classroom practices can be partly contributed to the individual teacher's incompetence in language proficiency and pedagogical methods.

Meanwhile, it can be partly contributed to the social and cultural context encompassing the EFL classes in China.

In the context of secondary education in China, the most important test is *gaokao*, the annually held national college entrance examination in China. Parents, teachers, the school administrative, the community all place a tremendous value on this high-stakes examination. The examination result is linked with every important decision from the placement of students, evaluation of teachers, administrators and high schools, to the allocation of resources to schools. In this exam-driven context, teachers always place less emphasis on students' actual communicative ability in using English, which will not be assessed in the exam. Zhang and Liu's (2014) extensive survey confirms the exam-oriented nature of English teaching in China. Their research shows that the majority of teachers and students agree the current English education in schools and universities is examination oriented. Furthermore, all teachers agree *drill, practice*, and *lecturing* are among the most effective ways for test preparation.

If we put the teacher's teaching practice against the above background, her activities get justified to some extent and begin to make sense. Her devotion to test items practice and test skills are aimed at students' stellar performance in the examination. The absence of wait-time and voluntary bid align with her intention to maintain an efficient class and cover as much content as possible. Her obsession with correct answers and key words is also in line with the goal of achieving a high score in the exam. In fact, this teacher's approach of mundane, direct instruction coupled with much drill and test item practice works well in improving examination performance and she is the director of her department. The result is rewarding and in turn reinforced her inclination to this traditional approach.

The research by Zhang and Liu (2014) also reveals the disagreement between teachers and students on English education evaluation. Whereas most teachers show a high degree of satisfaction toward the current English education and regard that it has generally met students' expectations and needs, the students incline to the opposite point of view and indicate their overall dissatisfaction with current English education.

To sum up, the inclination to traditional, non-interactive approach of teaching is formed under both the individual and the contextual factors. In order to shift away from this approach and promote a more interactive approach in the secondary schools, a more comprehensive assessment system and a robust teacher development program are needed.

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